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The Reappraisal of Neo-Confucianism

By HELLMUT WILHELM

I

As in all living scholarly traditions one can see in traditional Chinese historiography a wide range of divergent opinion as to what history is and how it should be written. On one point, however, all schools of Chinese historiography agree, and this is the clear awareness of the evaluative character of their trade. The historian of every school was an arbiter who, by passing judgment assessed the value of, and gave meaning to, events.¹ This consciously evaluative character of Chinese historiography demanded self-reliance and courage on the part of the historian, who was not only the keeper of documents and the recorder of events; his assessments assumed normative status like the sentences of a judge.

Theoretically autonomous, the historian was, however, dependent for the substantiation of his judgment upon the traditional system and the traditional hierarchy of values as accepted or ordained at a given period of time. The data of intellectual history were also considered binding on the historian. These data formed the code by which the judgment of the historian was determined. Thus the philosopher's position was further reinforced; he defined the dominant values which in turn were eternalised by the historian.

When Chinese Marxist historians followed the mandate of Mao to reassess Chinese history in Marxian terms, intellectual history presented them with an especially formidable task. Specifically the phenomenon of Neo-Confucianism² posed a problem, for its system of values had been accepted, and made to be accepted by imperial decree for centuries, and were reflected not only in all recent history but also in commonly assumed social and personal attitudes. What was involved in this re-assessment was not just bringing about a new Marxian understanding of the data of history, but breaking down the acceptance of values and

¹ See H. Wilhelm, "Der Sinn des Geschehens nach dem Buch der Wandlungen," *Eranos Jahrbuch* 26, Zürich 1958, pp. 351-386, particularly p. 381 *et seq.*, and "Chinesische Historiographie," *Gesellschaft und Staat in China*, Hamburg 1960, pp. 137-142.

² The term "Neo-Confucianism" has been used in a variety of interpretations in recent literature. For Carsun Chang, for instance, everything that happened in the intellectual field beginning with Han Yü, down to and including Ch'en Tu-hsiu, is Neo-Confucianism. In this paper I shall place particular emphasis on the Ch'eng-Chu school which, if not philosophically the most interesting, is politically the most important trend of thought during the later centuries of Imperial China.

the dominance of attitudes which were still very much alive in 1942 and in 1949. Re-evaluation of history had to go hand in hand with re-education.

According to Marxist theory, breaking the power of these values should not have been a difficult task. Once specific contradictions in material life were removed and a specific form of social existence was modified, social consciousness should have changed automatically and values connected with this special stage of social consciousness should have gradually faded away. The Chinese Communists were to learn to their chagrin that this was not always the case.

A typology of the values which Marxian reassessors had to face in this field might contribute toward an understanding of their strategy in coping with this task. There are, I believe, certain values reflected in what Marxists call "social consciousness" which are without doubt rather closely linked to the prevailing social hierarchy. These could be called canonical values. A general, if enforced, acceptance of this type of values is expressed in the distribution of status and authority in a given society. Attitudes and symbols connected with the position of the emperor, with the ladder of success in officialdom, with the distinctions of age and sex, rest on such canonical values and may be used as a rather close indication of the prevalent social structure. Embodied in "virtues" and "rites," their prescriptions are operable in a specific social context only and they change their applicability with a change of this context. The term "loyalty," to take an example, had a different content in pre-imperial ("feudal") and in imperial times during the periods of long lasting and of fast changing dynasties. The rituals of mourning were adapted to changing social attitudes and, just like other rituals, were even used to induce desired change. And certain virtues connected with the exercise of filial piety reflect directly the actual position of the father and other relatives in society.

Not all values do, however, exhibit this degree of social contingency. A second type, which I would like to call archetypal values, seems to be independent of the prevailing social context but derived from basic, generally human, relationships and from fundamental, generally human, urges and needs. They grow out of those strata of the human psyche which as a rule remain unconscious, and they are expressed in primordial symbols reflected in mythology and legendary, as well as legendarised history, in religious usages and in poetic imagery. Values of this type have, of course, a cogency much beyond that of strictly canonical values; they will be found operative alongside with, and at times in opposition to, the social realities of the day. At times, in well constructed

societies,³ they will work in consonance with, and add conviction and staying power to, canonical values. This seems to have been the case in several periods of Chinese history. They retain their force, however, even under changing societal circumstances. When, for instance, the father in society is stripped of his dominant position, a filial son will dispense with the expressions of the virtue of filial piety, he will no longer consider it his duty "to scratch reverently his father's back." However, the father-son relationship still remains as an archetypal value and, directly or obversely, moulds the son's attitude toward his father. In extreme cases of contrariety between these two value systems, a schism will result, affecting not only the personality structure of the individual but also throwing culture into a crisis.⁴

A third type of values seems to be of more recent vintage. It seems to have gained general currency only when, during periods of enlightenment, the human mind achieved another step in its self-realisation. This type, which I would like to call utopian values, is expressed in seemingly abstract notions, not or not yet realised in society. Here belong the values of liberty, equality, democracy and the like, but also Science with a capital S and Industrialisation. Their future-directedness gives these values a specific emotional force which appears as cogent as those of the other two types.⁵ They are embodied in "causes" for which men have fought and died. Their apparent rationality supplies them with a degree of unassailability which the other two types of values do not share. Not even the architects of a Communist society, can dare to come out openly against freedom or against democracy even though both these notions have no place in a Communist organisation. They may assail religion as an opiate for the people; but they have to profess the principle of freedom of religious belief.

II

In this configuration of problems, the task of dealing with traditional values does not rest solely on the shoulders of the intellectual historian. We are not concerned here with the emergence and the cultivation of new values. The special machinery established for their propagation is well known, the degree of its efficiency would have to be discussed in a different context. But re-evaluation of the tradition also needs social engineers as well as scientists, and, in particular, it needs special techniques of value elimination and a special apparatus to enforce these techniques. Much has been written about these techniques and their

³ See Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954), pp. 360-381. "Balanced" societies is Neumann's term.

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 381-394.

⁵ See Ira Progoff, "The Dynamics of Hope and the Image of Utopia," *Eranos Jahrbuch* 1963, Zürich 1964, pp. 89-145.

enforcement, and they do not have to concern us here. We might, however, want to keep in mind that the decision that a certain value should go necessarily leads to an application of these techniques, sometimes on a nationwide scale. The decision as such is arrived at under the pressure of a frightening responsibility not only intellectual but to an even greater degree, social. The decision is not only, and as a rule not even primarily, for the intellectual historian to take, but to the extent that he participates in this process, the responsibility is also his. He always works in the knowledge that the intellectual processes of analysis and reassessment will reach far beyond the strictly intellectual scene; he forges the sword that is then applied in battle, possibly against himself.

This pressure might, I believe, help to explain a certain diffidence and caution among Communist China's intellectual historians. There is a tendency to work with only a very limited armoury of intellectual tools and to apply concepts which one can be reasonably certain are, and will in the foreseeable future, be acknowledged and accepted elements of the political premises under which he labours. This gives the writings of the present-day intellectual historians in China, even of those who are known to be in complete mastery of their fields, the appearance of a rather low level of sophistication, to say the least. Problems of the Chinese intellectual tradition are again and again garbed in the antitheses, materialism *versus* idealism and dialectics *versus* metaphysics, so that on just about every page the reader gets the eerie feeling of *déjà vu*.

Intellectual adventurousness has not, however, entirely disappeared among present-day Chinese historians. In addition to caution, we find an almost uncanny sense of the politically possible. Whenever the political moment seems to permit, a voice or even a concert of voices clamours for the extension of intellectual boundaries and for the inclusion of cherished, or secretly cherished, traditional values. The experience of the transiency of these moments which all intellectual historians in China must share by now had not, by 1963 at least, dampened this spirit of daring for which eventually, of course, the price must be paid.

III

Apart from the political ambience in which they are working, the task of the Chinese intellectual historians has been circumscribed by what have come to be considered as the Marxist classics. Even without strictly defining the role of the historian, dialectical materialism, as a determinant concept of Marxist historiography, has implicitly set the stage for their performance. Intellectual historians have to keep pace with what are considered to be the laws of development of society. The historian

and particularly the intellectual historian cannot remain within the comparatively safe precincts of what has been ridiculed as "factology"; his task is to appraise and to pass judgment. In other words history under the Communists is at least as evaluative as classical Chinese historiography always has been. This puts the historian straight into the battle of values where he has to conduct himself with the same degree of responsibility, if not with the same degree of power, as the politician.

Soviet Marxist tradition has not supplied any specific criteria for this evaluative task. There is, to be sure, the general schema of historical development, whose stark simplicity, particularly after the elimination of the concept of "Oriental society"⁶ gave little incentive to sophisticated thinking. Nor could Soviet sinology be tapped for specific guidelines for "bourgeois" sinologists with their "bourgeois" working methods continued to be respected. Even today such scholars as Alekseyev are still in high repute, and whatever practical services Alekseyev rendered to his Chinese colleagues, they do not measure up to his achievements in traditional sinology. The short-lived Soviet Institute of Sinology, established in 1958, and its four issues of the journal *Sovetskoe Kitaevedenie* could not have been very inspirational to Chinese scholars since they appear to have been rather closely controlled by Peking.⁷

This situation is not surprising, for the position of the Soviet intellectual historian was entirely different from that of his Chinese colleague. He did not have to cope with the intellectual tradition and values of his own country. Whatever he "appraised" was a foreign import and he could do so coolly and remain outside of the field of gravity of traditional values. For the Chinese, however, the intellectual tradition was almost identical with his cultural heritage. Once the initial urge to throw away the past was overcome, he faced names, situations, systems and concepts which for him weighed heavily one way or the other. He had to face squarely the battle of values which his Soviet colleague could easily escape. The emotion-laden decision of the Chinese not to participate in any international conference even in Moscow dealing with the Chinese tradition was certainly not only, and probably not even mainly, a reflection of the current stage of Soviet-Chinese relationships but rather of the awareness of the specific position of the Chinese historian, particularly the intellectual historian, when confronting the values of his own cultural tradition.

⁶ K. A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 402 *et seq.*

⁷ Mark Mancall, "Soviet Historians and the Sino-Soviet Alliance," John Keep and Liliana Brisby, ed., *Contemporary History in the Soviet Mirror* (New York: Praeger, 1964), pp. 181-184.

IV

For a closer understanding of the Chinese intellectual historians' re-appraisal of Neo-Confucianism, there might be some merit in tracing, at least in outline, the zigs and zags which various political trends and attitudes imposed on their activities. A tug of war has taken place between two groups: those who worked entirely along doctrinaire lines attempting as best they could to apply to the Chinese intellectual tradition the meagre assortment of concepts provided by Marxist and Soviet theory, and those who wanted to retain room for traditional values. The latter are found, when they are found at all, mainly in the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences where stalwarts such as Feng Yu-lan and Ho Lin had succeeded in establishing a home base. There they sometimes got a hearing, even in the face of scathing attacks from outside, particularly from the Institute of History where Hou Wai-lu and his praetorian guards were entrenched. For short periods, the more adventurous spirit of the Institute of Philosophy spilled over and was taken up by other centres in the country. At other times, such as the present, strictest orthodoxy dominated the Institute of Philosophy as well.

It might be significant that the time when serious discussions on the appraisal of the intellectual heritage gradually gathered momentum coincided with the time of the anti-Hu Shih campaign. Thus the problems were taken up not for their intrinsic interest only, but in order to combat Hu Shih's position. This combative necessity forced the discussants into points of view that they might not otherwise have assumed, and these forced assumptions limited their future freedom of action. The attempt to show that Hu Shih's evaluations of Chinese intellectual history were part of the conspiracy between Chiang Kai-shek and capitalist imperialism forced upon them a dilemma which they could not then satisfactorily solve and which has ever since determined their course of action. Hu Shih's strongly anti-Neo-Confucianist position, for instance, had to be shown to be nefarious even though Marxist ideology would have demanded the same position, if for slightly different reasons. A kind of tortured reasoning ensued in which arguments *ad hominem* had to replace sound thinking. Feng Yu-lan has the following to say in this context⁸: "As an intellectual of the compradore class, Hu Shih consistently served imperialism . . . his thought supports imperialism and also supports feudalism . . . Hu Shih's so-called objective history . . . is a deceitful device of the capitalist historian to dress up his class-mindedness. History is of the past, but historians are people belonging to a

⁸ "Che-hsueh shih yü cheng-chih," *Che-hsueh Yen-chiu* (hereafter *CHYC*) (*Philosophical Research*), January 1955, pp. 70-83.

distinct, present-day class . . . Historians of philosophy of the capitalist class serve the purposes of the capitalist class. When we, who are working in the field of philosophy, want to reveal historical truth we have to serve the purposes of the working class. What is good for the working class coincides with the progressive trend in history, that is why the working class is not afraid of having historical truth revealed. Only by revealing historical truth can we serve the purposes of the working class.”⁹

But then in 1956 a new theme was inserted into the discussion, started by an article by Yang Yung-chih in the year's first issue of the *Che-hsueh Yen-chiu*.¹⁰ This article is an emotional plea for the loving preservation of the cultural heritage of the fatherland (*tsu-kuo*). Covered by quotes from Lenin and from Mao's *New Democracy*, Yang maintains that it is the duty of Marxism to preserve the cultural heritage. Everything that is valuable in thought and culture should be absorbed and transformed. Only petty bourgeois revolutionaries, he claims, do not recognise the importance of this task. Recent Soviet attitudes toward their own past are also adduced as examples. To be sure, the cultural heritage should be cleansed of all trends which Marxism opposes. Of these he finds only two in the Chinese tradition: an attitude of nihilism and cosmopolitanism, and an attitude of reactionism and chauvinism (*kuo-ts'ui*). It becomes abundantly clear that what Yang wants to have lovingly preserved is not just the record of the past but its guiding values.

The discussions of this proposition soon gained impetus. Labels were attached freely to personalities and concepts of the past which would make them Marxist and therefore acceptable. One incident might deserve special mention. In December 1956 Yang Hsing-shun delivered a lecture in Russian, to a group of Soviet specialists, on the materialist tradition in Chinese philosophy.¹¹ With pride and self-assurance, representatives of the Big Brother country were informed that the Chinese past was much more acceptable than their own. Even the Yin people of 1400–1100 B.C. were claimed to be materialist, witness their calendarological knowledge based on the yin-yang concept. Chou times produced great astronomers and mathematicians. Technological knowledge, particularly in metallurgy and agronomy, is attested to in the *Book of Songs* and then again in the *Kuo-yü* and the *Tso-chuan*. The ch'i concept and the concept of the five elements are materialistic. From early writings the *Tao-te-ching* is materialistic and so is Yang Chu, and Hsun-tzu is the greatest materialist philosopher of ancient times.

⁹ For similar arguments see Chang Heng-shou, *CHYC*, February 1956, pp. 18–40; many other contributions in *CHYC* and other journals of the time.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* January 1956, pp. 52–70.

¹¹ Chinese translation in *CHYC*, April 1956, pp. 84–101.

Materialists of Han times include Ssu-ma Ch'ien, Yang Hsiung, Huan T'an, and above all, Wang Ch'ung. In the Six Dynasties period we have Fan Chen, in T'ang, Lü Ts'ai, and Han Yü and his disciples also argue from a materialist foundation. Neo-Confucianism is said to be a struggle between idealist and materialist trends, Chang Ts'ai holding up the materialist end. In Ming there is Li Chih and all the great thinkers of early Ch'ing such as Huang Tsung-hsi, Wang Fu-chih and Ku Yen-wu are anti-feudal and stress empirical knowledge. Then comes Tai Chen and the most progressive Kung Ting-an. The crowning achievement in late Ch'ing is then represented by T'an Ssu-t'ung out of whose leftist trend and under the banner of materialism, Sun Yat Sen's party emerged.

These discussions were summarised and scrutinised in a symposium on the object and scope of the history of Chinese philosophy and on the preservation of the cultural heritage held by the Department of Philosophy of Peking University in January 1957.¹² A rather free-wheeling exchange seems to have ensued at this time between the preservationists and the doctrinaires. Among the first group, Ho Lin seems to have been particularly persuasive. Feng Yu-lan spoke up strongly and Wang I even went so far as to propose not to treat Chinese philosophy with methods derived from reinterpretation of Western philosophy but to concentrate on special points and concepts of the Chinese intellectual heritage. The dogmatic use of terms like materialism and idealism was attacked and their value as determinants of good and bad was questioned by Ho Lin, Ch'en Hsin-chai and Chang Heng-shou. The counter-attack was not slow in coming from the doctrinaires, among them Kuan Feng, Cheng Shih-ying, T'ang Yueh, and Chang Tai-nien. But they do not seem to have won the day, at least not yet at that time, for the yearning for the preservation of the heritage seems to have been too general. Again it is abundantly clear that what was to be preserved was not just the reinterpreted record but the values contained in the record.

It did not take long, however, for this discussion to be cut short. Soon after this symposium, the charge of revisionism was hurled against the preservationists¹³ and nothing was heard of the preservation of traditional values for several years. At this time the Academy journal opened its pages to "mass philosophy" or "the philosophy of workers and peasants."

It was not until the widespread hunger after the collapse of the "Great Leap Forward" had induced the régime to relax ideological

¹² See *Pei-ching Ta-hsueh Hsueh-pao*, *Jen-wen K'o-hsueh* (Science section of Peking University Journal), February 1957, pp. 145-148; *CHYC*, January 1957, p. 135.

¹³ Sun Ting-kuo, *CHYC*, April 1957, pp. 1-8; Wu Chuan-ch'i, *ibid.* June 1957, pp. 18-37.

reins somewhat, that preservationism got another hearing. Then a profusion of propositions and discussions poured forth from some of the major centres first focusing on specific clusters of problems but soon involving the whole country in an attempt to redefine the intellectual historian's task. The attempted re-establishment of Confucius was the principal problem originating the controversy.¹⁴ It was widely discussed in Canton, Wuhan, and far up north in Heilungchiang,¹⁵ and in November 1962 a nation-wide symposium was organised by the Historical Society of Shantung and the Historical Institute of Shantung province with over 160 philosophers and historians from sixteen provinces attending.¹⁶ Another lively discussion was aroused by the attempted re-establishment of the *Book of Changes*, proceeding mainly from Li Ching-fang's writings.¹⁷ A host of other problems was pursued also, among them the question of the nature of early Taoism (Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu) in the course of which discussions even the Yin-fu-ching was proclaimed materialist.¹⁸ The strategy of the preservationists varied. Some resorted to the simple device of attaching acceptable Marxist labels to those parts of the heritage which they wanted to see preserved. Ho Lin, quoting heavily from Hegel, Lenin and Mao, came forward with another bold attempt to relativise the concept of materialism.¹⁹ Feng Yu-lan was among those who attempted to ascribe class-transcending value to certain parts of the cultural heritage, but the most heated controversy on this point was aroused by Liu Chieh and his endeavour to salvage Confucianist virtues, particularly jen.²⁰ The counter-attack of doctrinaires was vivid and sharp but the impression is that at times they were driven to the defensive and even into certain concessions.

When, recently, the régime had abated the problem of feeding its people, and when, in consequence, the ideological reins were tightened again,²¹ discussions came to a sudden end. Chang Tung-feng was chosen as the executioner. In the first 1964 issue of the *Che-hsueh Yen-chiu* ²² he summarised the entire discussion in an article entitled, "On the Methodology of the History of Philosophy and the Question of Preservation of Ethics." He calls a halt to the "beatification" of Confucius and

¹⁴ See Joseph P. Levenson, "The Place of Confucius in Communist China," *The China Quarterly*, No. 12, Oct.-Dec. 1962.

¹⁵ Report on the Heilungchiang discussions in *CHYC*, April 1963, p. 83.

¹⁶ See report in *CHYC*, January 1963, pp. 54-57.

¹⁷ Li Ching-fang, *Chou-I Che-hsueh chi ch'i Pien-cheng-fa Yin-su (Elements of the Philosophy of the Book of Changes and Its Dialectics)* (Shantung: Jen-min Ch'u-pan She) (1961), Vol. 1; (1962), Vol. 2.

¹⁸ Wang Ming, *CHYC*, May 1962, pp. 59-68.

¹⁹ *CHYC*, January 1961, pp. 60-68.

²⁰ See discussions in *Hsueh-shu Yen-chiu*, Canton at this period.

²¹ George T. Yü, "The 1962 and 1963 Sessions of the National People's Congress of Communist China," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 4, No. 8, August 1964, pp. 981-990.

²² Chang Tung-feng, *CHYC*, pp. 61-85.

scrutinises and condemns the preservationists of different hues one by one. He ends declaring that controversy is admissible but, as Mao said, the correct point of view must prevail. The message of Chang's statement was reinforced by articles in other leading journals, among them one by Feng Chih in *Wen-i-pao*²³ and another by Hou Wai-lu in the *Li-shih Yen-chiu*.²⁴

V

It was not accidental that in the intermittent battle over the task and scope of intellectual history, the issue of Neo-Confucianism was almost entirely by-passed. To begin with, the body of thought left by the Neo-Confucianists is very extensive and extremely complex. It had resisted systematisation and categorisation under any set of concepts including those proposed by this school itself. Almost all of its thinking and most of its writing is of the aphoristic type and the relationship between its different sections is not necessarily consistent. Also, Neo-Confucianism had already become increasingly unpopular by late imperial times, and due, among other things, to Hu Shih's rejection of it, had fallen out of grace in early republican times to such an extent that the value of including Neo-Confucianism in a university course on the history of Chinese philosophy was questioned.

The recent opponents of Neo-Confucianism attacked not only its intrinsic concepts and values but its use (or abuse) by imperial and post-imperial ideologists. Hou Wai-lu states this problem rather succinctly with reference to Chu Hsi. Chu Hsi's teachings, he says, eventually became the imperially-sanctioned academic philosophy, and thus the Tao Hsueh (traditionalist school) became established. During the last half-millennium, temporal rulers from K'ang-hsi to Tseng Kuo-fan to Chiang Kai-shek used the religious clericalism of Chu Hsi to add bright lacquer to their positions. It must be stressed also, Hou continues, that later conservatives and reactionaries such as Yeh Te-hui, Chang Chün-mai, Feng Yu-lan and Ho Lin all came out of Chu Hsi's school. After the liberation, attempts were even made to mix up Chu Hsi's doctrine with Marxism. And as for Western capitalist sinologues, they have attempted at recent philosophical congresses to construct a modern philosophy composed of Western capitalist philosophy and Chinese feudalist traditionalism.²⁵ Thus, Hou says, we must not only discuss the

²³ Feng Chih, *Wen-i-pao*, April 1964, pp. 14-17. "The foremost duty of the workers in the field of literature is to use historical materialism to explain the phenomena of history and to use the critical spirit of Marxism-Leninism when dealing with Chinese or foreign classical heritage."

²⁴ Hou Wai-lu, *Li-shih Yen-chiu (Historical Research)*, January 1964, pp. 15-30. "We must firmly grasp the class character of philosophy as the most general principle of Marxism-Leninism."

²⁵ This, I assume, refers to the East-West philosophy meetings, organised by C. A. Moore.

Chu Hsi of the twelfth century, but we have also to deal with the recent image of Chu Hsi, the Aristotelised Chu Hsi, the Hegalised Chu Hsi and the Chu Hsi adapted to Marxism.²⁶

Only two other Neo-Confucianists have been singled out for special treatment and discussion. One is Chang Tsai²⁷ who, in contradistinction to other Neo-Confucianists, gradually developed into the fair-haired materialist of the school and was almost generally recognised as such. The other is Chou Tun-i, whom Chang Tai-nien also claimed as a materialist misrepresented as an idealist by the Ch'engs and Chu Hsi.²⁸ In a later report²⁹ this misrepresentation was said to have been spread further by a conspiracy of capitalist sinologues such as de Harlez, Zenker, Hackmann and Forke.³⁰ The proposition concerning Chou on the other hand has not found widespread acceptance.

For the rest of the reappraisal of Neo-Confucianism we must take our clues from general surveys and hand-books. Hou Wai-lu's *Chung-kuo Ssu-hsiang T'ung-shih*³¹ can be taken as representative of the orthodox position. Hou almost never strays from the correct point of view and never yields to the lure of tradition. His book is not only the most extensive but presumably also the most authoritative coverage. It supersedes earlier treatments such as Lü Chen-yü's *Chung-kuo Cheng-chih Ssu-hsiang Shih*³² (*History of Chinese Political Thought*), and is found simplified and popularised in shorter treatments like Yang Yung-kuo's *Chien-ming Chung-kuo Ssu-hsiang Shih*.³³ *The Philosophy Reader* compiled (anonymously) by the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of

²⁶ Summarised from pp. 596-598 of Vol. 41 of Hou's *Chung-kuo Ssu-hsiang T'ung-shih*, 1962 ed.

²⁷ For example, Chang Tai-nien, *CHYC*, January 1955, pp. 110-130 and discussion; *ibid.* March 1955, pp. 142-148; April 1956, pp. 136-143. See also *CHYC*, February 1957, pp. 54-69; and *Pei-ching Ta-hsueh Hsueh-pao*, *Jen-wen K'o-hsueh*, March 1957, pp. 57-68.

²⁸ *CHYC*, February 1957, pp. 62-63.

²⁹ See review of V. A. Krivstov's article on the *T'ai-chi-t'u shuo* in *CHYC*, March 1959, p. 41. Chang Tsai and Chou Tun-i are already claimed as materialists in the *History of Philosophy* compiled by the Soviet Academy of Sciences (1957); a report on the treatment of Chinese philosophy in this book asserts that the Soviet scholars followed closely the evaluations of their Chinese colleagues such as Hou Wai-lu, Kuo Mo-jo, Feng Yu-lan, etc. See *CHYC*, April 1957, pp. 110-116.

³⁰ In another place the conspirators are Legge, Abel Remusat, Forke and Wilhelm.

³¹ Hou Wai-lu, *Chung-kuo Ssu-hsiang T'ung-shih*. (*A General History of Chinese Thought*) (Peking: San-lien, 1962). Neo-Confucianism is treated in two parts of Vol. 4. In the following I assume a rather polemical attitude towards Hou's interpretative methods and results. This, however, should not becloud the fact that Hou's compendium is of great value, that the factual evidence presented is rich and on the whole judiciously chosen, and particularly that he does not try, as many others do, to shun issues even if they are inconvenient.

³² Lü Chen-yü, *Chung-kuo Cheng-chih Ssu-hsiang Shih* (*A History of Chinese Thought*) (Peking: Jen-min Ch'u-pan She, 1962). Originally written in 1937, then frequently revised.

³³ Yang Yung-kuo, *Chien-ming Chung-kuo Ssu-hsiang Shih* (*A Short History of Chinese Thought*) (Peking: Hsin Hua, 1962).

Sciences³⁴ avoids contradicting Hou's position even in cases where it obviously disagrees.

Boiled down to its essentials, the basic task of the reappraisal of Neo-Confucianism was to show that the social contradictions of the time of its development were reflected in an intellectual struggle. Specifically it had to be shown that the political struggle of Ssu-ma Kuang's old party and Wang An-shih's new party was expressed in and reflected a struggle of materialist and idealist trends. Expressed in class terms, Wang represented the small clans, specifically the oncoming petty capitalists, while the old party represented the great clans (*hao-tsu*). Wang was of course the foremost representative of materialism. When Wang's political fortunes waned, the social trends which he represented persisted. Later when the Sung was intellectually dominated by Neo-Confucianism, this struggle was expressed not only in the struggle between the old and the new party but also within Neo-Confucianism. Hou takes his clues for an interpretation of the philosophy of the earlier period from the actual or assumed political positions of the philosophers concerned. These clues are at times rather flimsy. The fact that a given philosopher lived for a period of time in Loyang was frequently sufficient to label him since Loyang had been the power centre of the aristocracy since Tang times and the conservatives established something like a government in exile there after their fall from power. Personal associations and exchange of poetry are taken as important clues if no more tangible political involvement can be shown. Differences within the old party, such as those between the Loyang faction, the Shensi faction and Szechuan faction, are judged to be predominantly personal power struggles; the special position of the Shensi school is, however, singled out as also ideologically significant.³⁵

Since philosophy is a reflection of politics, the political protagonist Ssu-ma Kuang had to be treated also as the head of the Neo-Confucianist school.³⁶ This gets Hou into difficulties immediately, for Ssu-ma differs fundamentally from all other Neo-Confucianists in the choice of his hero, Yang Hsiung, and his villain, Meng-tzu, and even Hou acknowledges materialist elements in Yang Hsiung and the idealist nature of Meng-tzu. Hou tries to solve this problem by claiming that Ssu-ma, the clearest case of a reactionary, selected only Yang's idealist and religious elements. And while occasional remarks of Ssu-ma lend themselves to a materialist interpretation, they are deceptive, for his basic

³⁴ *Chung-kuo Che-hsueh-shih Tzu-liao Hsuan-chi* (Reader in the History of Chinese Philosophy) (Peking: Chung Hua, 1962). Neo-Confucianism is covered in the fourth volume.

³⁵ Hou, pp. 497-509. *The Academy Reader* follows this guilt-by-association pattern rather closely.

³⁶ The absence of Ou-yang Hsiu is puzzling. *The Academy Reader* does not deal with Ssu-ma Kuang.

attitude is idealistic, particularly his understanding of Heaven, a concept with which he justifies feudal inequities.³⁷

Hou's difficulties are clear from the start. A statesman has to be made into a philosopher. An admirer of Yang Hsiung and a doubter of Meng-tzu has to be made into an abysmal idealist. And even then, there remain unresolved dregs which can be explained away only as deceitful devices.

Hou's treatment of Shao Yung is just the reverse. Here we do not have a reactionary politician who has to be shown to be a reactionary philosopher, but a philosopher with a reactionary historical philosophy who has to be shown to be involved in reactionary politics. In the case of Shao this is rather difficult because he never played a major political role, and Hou seems to be rather uneasy in dealing with him. There is so much neatness and logic in Shao's system. He is also the one who, in his poetry, talked the language of the people. All this does not fail to impress Hou, to his own annoyance. First Hou uses the guilt-by-association argument. Then he hits out at Shao as the great deceiver who, with clever devices, manipulates seemingly materialist concepts and accommodates contemporary scientific advances to strengthen his idealist position and thus makes science "the slave of religion." Hou makes a real contribution when he traces Shao's concepts back to the tradition of the apocrypha which was particularly strong in northern Sung times. But Hou is less successful when he tries to show that Shao's li (principle) concept is identical with heavenly fate (t'ien-ming). For Shao the li can be grasped only in things (wu) and not in the self (wo), nor in Heaven. Shao's concept of contemplation of things (kuan-wu) does not mean, as Hou wants it to, an exploration of ordained fate but has rather mystical qualities.³⁸

The *Academy Reader* on the whole seems to be much more relaxed in its treatment of Shao. Here, too, Shao is traced back to the *I-Ching* tradition of Han, particularly to Chiao Kan and Ching Fang and then to the *Ts'an-t'ung-ch'i* and Taoist magic. Shao's doctrines of images and numbers, hsiang-shu hsueh (symbolic numerology), is here explained as the method of transforming a subjectively devised logical system into an absolute truth. The *Reader* also points out that Shao calls himself An-lo hsien-sheng (Mr. Optimist), but that his optimism is only superficial, and actually he suffered intensely under the conditions of his time.

Neither of these treatments does justice to some of the special qualities of Shao, such as his intellectual daring which occasionally bordered on the heterodox and his clearly idealist philosophy which

³⁷ Hou, pp. 511-521.

³⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 521-535.

makes him to a certain extent a predecessor of Ch'eng Hao and certainly of Lu Hsiang-shan.

The problem of Chou-Tun-i, whom later Neo-Confucianists held in such high esteem, is solved by Hou rather simply by debunking him. Hou claims he was neither an important politician nor a great philosopher. His philosophy is said to be metaphysical and feudalistic, cribbed from the apocrypha, particularly the *I* apocrypha, and influenced by Ch'an Buddhism. Hou has nothing but ridicule for the attempts to make a materialist out of Chou.³⁹

The *Academy Reader* gives Chou a little more of his due. More is made of his "strong relations to the old party" and of his position as the originator of the mainstream of Neo-Confucianism. In its interpretation the *Reader* does, however, more or less agree with Hou. Chou is made out to be a strict idealist who was the one to enrich traditional Confucianism with Taoist, particularly magic, ideas. The influence of the *Book of Changes* is considered to be only superficial; the mysticism of the *Tao-te-ching* is seen as a much stronger influence. Also Buddhist influences are pointed out particularly in Chou's concept of desirelessness (wu-yu). His ch'eng (sincerity) concept is made to stand for his acceptance of existing conditions. Thus all his philosophy is devised to serve the authoritarianism of the feudal order of his time.

Except for Chu Hsi himself, Hou devotes his most extensive section to Chang Tsai and the Shensi group.⁴⁰ Here he discovers a group of philosophers who did not enjoy the support of the great clans as the Loyang people did. Was not the opposition to Wang An-shih of Chang and his group (except Chang's brother) only weak? Was not Chang the only one who was spared when in Hsi-ning times Wang beat the old party completely off the political stage? Was Chang not living in a border situation where the constant threat of the Hsi-hsia opened his eyes to the political realities of the day? And was not Chang's family much lower in official position than that of the Ch'engs and that of Shao Yung? All this could not fail to set him on the road toward materialism and anti-spiritualism and help him discard the fetters of Chanism and of the two Ch'engs.

Chang thus became the chosen antithesis in the dialectical process in which Neo-Confucianism had to be understood. Chang's concept, on which Hou and others concentrated to sustain this interpretation, is the ch'i concept. Chang does link his ch'i quite closely to material existence (wu); in fact, however, his difference from other Neo-Confucianists is one of degree only and, it appears to me at least, of minor degree. For Chang, ch'i is just as closely linked to the li (principle). He too conceives

³⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 535-544.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 545-570.

of ch'i in dual state, that of dispersal and that of contraction, the latter leading to the world of existence, the former to the Great Void (t'ai-hsü). Hou has some difficulties explaining away the strongly Buddhist connotations of this term. He does so by declaring that in Chang's understanding it was a general term for the world of time and space.⁴¹ The same is true for Chang's hsiang (image, symbol) concept, which Hou would have Chang understand as something like an attribute of ch'i. With respect to Chang's "two state" concept, which goes back to the *Analects* and to the philosophy of the *Book of Changes*, Hou draws consolation from the fact that the interaction of the two states is spontaneous and not purposive. Thus Hou states that Chang is opposed to idealism and clearly contains a dialectical element.

The application of all these interpretive concepts to Chang's thoughts without doubt seems forced. Now, to be sure, Hou is not the only one to use Western interpretive concepts to explain Chinese philosophy, and it seems unfair to accuse him alone of what appears to me as a methodological fallacy which he shares with so many others, even though Hou and his peers put this Procrustean method to a much more strictly political use. On the other hand, there is very little intellectual attraction in the alternative to beating Hou on his own grounds. It could be pointed out, however, that the cherished materialist Chang, with all his dialectical elements, maintained a political position which Hou, much to his disappointment, cannot possibly claim as progressive. Chang failed, Hou states, in his understanding of the relationship of mind and matter and thus he again fell into the trap of idealism.

The *Academy Reader* makes much more of the point that Chang maintained "the feudal ethics of optimism." Here, too, the by now orthodox doctrine that Chang is a materialist with dialectical elements is accepted, even though there are some minor variations in interpretation. Chang's ch'i concept is monistic, not dualistic, his t'ai-hsü concept is just the sky and not the world of time and space, etc. But of the elements of the contemporary situation which conditioned Chang's thinking, for example, the peasant rebellions, which threatened the dynastic house of northern Sung, are stressed, and thus, the *Reader* states, it is quite reasonable to find that Chang, who proceeds from a defence of the feudal order, would in his writings completely reveal the position of the ruling class.

At the opposite pole from the materialist Chang Tsai, Hou puts the two Ch'eng brothers. Strangely, not too much is made of the differences between the two in their political careers and intellectual attitudes. They are, as a team, the founders and representatives of the idealistic li school

⁴¹ Hou takes this to be a restatement of a position taken by Liu Tsung-yuan, a man of whom he makes much as recently as in his 1964 article.

(school of principle) and the heads of the Loyang faction. Hou even opposes the thesis, supported by the *Academy Reader*, that Ch'eng Hao, with the functions he ascribed to the mind (hsin), can be considered a forerunner of the Lu-Wang school. Hou takes pains to show that the li concept of the Ch'engs has nothing to do with the Platonic idea, that it is, on the contrary, derived from the li concept of Hua-yen Buddhism, a derivation which, even if sustained, does not help at all toward an understanding of the li concept of the Ch'engs. He adds that it is spiritual rather than temporal and, of course, richly endowed with feudal connotations. This makes the Ch'engs representatives of religious clericalism (seng-lü chu-i), a term which here, as later on in the discussion of Chu Hsi, assumes great importance.

The *Academy Reader* makes more distinctions in its treatment of the two Ch'engs. There are minor differences in interpretation, even minor dialectical elements discovered here and there. The introspective trend and the inclination toward spiritual exercises as a method of self-cultivation and of transcendental experiences are more convincingly explained. The *Reader* agrees with Hou, not in its labels but in its conclusion.

Hou then proceeds to submit Chu Hsi's speculative (ssu-pien) philosophy to an extensive analysis,⁴² characterising his thought as "objective idealism" as against the "subjective idealism" of the Lu-Wang school, a characterisation which has by now found just about universal acceptance. To begin with, Hou links the political fate of Chu and other members of the Tao-hsueh school to the defeatist faction at the courts of the Emperors Kao, Hsiao and Ning. This is not quite accurate, since Chu Hsi was a great admirer of Yüeh Fei. Hou focuses on Chu Hsi's li (principle) concept which, he says, contains the secret of Chu's speculative philosophy. This philosophy posits an absolute and universal principle which at the same time is manifested in every individual object (the famous fan example). Hou claims this is an application of the li-shih (universal-particular or abstract-concrete) formula of the Hua-yen Buddhists and justifies the characterisation of Chu Hsi's philosophy as religious clericalism. Chu represents for Hou the final form of the trend to syncretise the three religions observable since the Six dynasties. Li then is:

(1) Spiritual: in the individual it is identical with human nature, seated in the heart or mind (hsin); in the universe it is identical with endowed fate (t'ien-ming) and it is also identical with the Supreme Ultimate and thereby the origin of all things. Even though the relationship between the subjective mind (hsin) and the objective absolute li is never clarified, it is clearly spiritual in nature.

⁴² Hou, pp. 595-647.

(2) Li is the highest abstraction without any concretisation (t'ai-chi and wu-chi).

(3) Li precedes matter and is the mystical origin of matter. The ch'i concept used here is *not* materialistic but something like an operational principle of yin and yang, produced by li. Chu Hsi's system is therefore not dualistic. Li in this sense is something like the logos of the Gnostics.

(4) Li is the supreme force which rules reality "like a man riding a horse." It is limitless in its power, not even limited by its own laws, something akin to the Holy Spirit of the Christians.

Chu Hsi's system is thus pure idealism and not, as had been recently maintained by Feng Yu-lan, an attempt to harmonise idealism and materialism.

Hou next examines Chu's relation to, and grasp of, the natural sciences. Capitalist scholars, Hou says, want to make Chu Hsi the greatest natural scientist and philosopher of nature in medieval China.⁴³ Also, all those who want to make a materialist out of Chu stress his scientific knowledge. Chu's ko-wu (investigation of things) concept, however, is not scientific in spirit or method, Hou states. Chu was not interested in the exploration of reality and the term "things" (wu) was used by him only as a stepping stone to gradual or sudden enlightenment concerning the highest principle. His speculative discourses pertain very little to things. He did borrow some contemporary data from the natural sciences to adorn his idealistic system. "Things" are an instrument manipulated by Chu not to explore reality but to gain distance from reality. His theories about the origin and the structure of the universe were not progressive in the context of his time, they were a patchwork of current common knowledge to which Chu added a mystical content in order to produce an image of the universe which would fit his religious clericalism.

In the universe thus explained by Chu the divinely established natural law is then linked to the feudalistic class structure and to authoritarian ethics. Hou declares that Chu could not disregard current demands for an equalisation of high and low status and a distribution of wealth, but with a sleight of hand, he postulates harmony as a universal principle for those involved in class struggle. As this principle is eternal, the feudalistic class structure also becomes unalterable. Class differentiation runs like a black thread through all of his doctrines. This is why it was not accidental that future rulers adopted this system.

The *Academy Reader* also calls Chu Hsi an objective idealist and adds that he is also referred to as a dualist. The points taken up by the

⁴³ This, I presume, refers to Needham.

Reader roughly coincide with those of Hou although they are at times differently argued. On the whole, the *Reader* does not seem to be able to discover anything objective or dualistic in Chu, even though this is not explicitly stated.

In conclusion it might be said that the conceptual and strictly terminological premises on which this reappraisal of Neo-Confucianism was conducted placed pitiable limitations on the debate and frequently diverted the debaters into positions unsupportable by the data of the case. Still, once this terminology is discarded, some of the results appear to be sound. There is no question, for instance, that a sober sociologist would agree that much within the Ch'eng-Chu school can be used to explain and has been used to sustain the structure of imperial China. On the other hand, and this seems to be serious, these premises have pushed the argument into a direction which a historian of philosophy or a sociologist cannot but reject. The artificial widening of the differences between Chang Tsai and the rest of the Ch'eng-Chu school into a dialectical counter-position is a case in point. The beclouding of the differences between the Ch'eng-Chu and Lu-Wang schools is another. These distortions are detrimental even to the Communists' own interests.

This last point might show that the arguments offered in reappraisal of Neo-Confucianism are more than just intellectual exercises undertaken in compliance with the political dictates of the time. It might show that the urge behind these arguments was not just intellectual, nor just political for that matter, but that basic value choices are involved here. A strange, if largely unconscious, fear of archetypal values and an eager, if indiscriminating, hope enticed by utopian values seem to have been the forces directing this choice. Goethe called fear and hope the greatest enemies of mankind.